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## Changing Venice Beach

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Mike Bonin lived a block from Venice Beach for 17 years, but just recently, he's started to see a shift in this community that draws people from around the world for its quirkiness and charm.

"I have noticed a change in the atmosphere and the ambience down there at night," said Bonin, who now serves on the Los Angeles City Council, representing Venice and the 11th District. "It has brought out sort of an unsavory element."

Now, Bonin is aiming to form a governing structure that maintains all the parts of the beach simultaneously. It could take a few years but the goal is to help Venice Beach – known around the world for its edgy, eccentric residents – manage itself.

But others are resisting the changes, fearing it will also alter the qualities that draw people to Venice in the first place.

The city has installed brighter lights along the beach. Leaders are considering increasing security cameras and adding a loudspeaker system to help the increasing number of tourists and people moving into the area feel safer.

Years ago, Bonin recalls locals saying they preferred it being darker so tourists would head elsewhere for the evening.

Some long-time residents of Venice remain skeptical about more security, especially when they hear from the police that crime hasn't increased lately. They question whether wealth in the area is the real driving force behind the changes.

"The reason we've got more police in Venice is because of gentrification," said Deborah Lashever, an activist in Venice. "It's called 'quality of life crime.' The people that are moving in that are buying the property are saying, 'We don't want these homeless people here.'"

For Bonin, homelessness and security are both just part of the issue.

Different agencies oversee different parts of the beach. Included are the city's Public Works Department, Parks and Recreation and the county's Beaches and Harbors Department. Venice's tourism also complicates matters. With about 16 million visitors every year, this beach is California's second largest tourist attraction after Disneyland, according to military research and the Los Angeles Police Department.

"Historically, no one has ever really looked at sort of that holistic issue of, 'How do you manage something that is many things simultaneously?'" said Bonin, who has worked on issues in Venice since 1996 in various capacities and took office last year. "There is no other facility in the world that attracts millions of people a year with nobody in charge."

The Los Angeles Police Department deploys about 22 extra police officers to the area every summer, according to an officer presentation at a Venice Neighborhood Council meeting.

In early February, Bonin's website announced an increase in police in the area that "will result in a more constant, near round-the-clock presence." One of the changes will be a stronger force of officers on bikes

along the boardwalk.

The site mentions that these changes were made in response to “community concerns over public safety and quality of life in neighborhoods near Venice Beach.”

Even though crime is not increasing, occasional one-off incidents highlight Venice Beach as a more dangerous place than it really is.

Tensions rose in March when two people were arrested during the weekly Venice drum circle. That followed a car accident last year involving a vehicle hitting more than a dozen pedestrians and killing one after driving onto pedestrian-only Ocean Front Walk. Discussions began about adding gates and posts along the roads that dead-end into Ocean Front Walk.

Bonin said he’s working to make sure those blockades take the form of art installations, planters and bike racks instead of actual gates to preserve the community’s character.

Despite the concern over homelessness on the beach, Venice lacks a shelter, and the California Coastal Commission wants to overturn a city beach curfew that currently keeps people off the sand from midnight until 5 a.m. Overturning that ban almost certainly would result in people sleeping on the beach.

Those who have homes, meanwhile, are spending more for them.

Home values in Venice have increased 28.3 percent in just the last year and are expected to shoot up nearly 11 percent by March 2015, according to real estate website Zillow. And homes in Venice are some of the most expensive in Los Angeles.

Some crimes have increased while others, such as aggravated assaults, have decreased in Venice Beach, making for no change in the total number of crimes in the last year, according to the April report to the Venice Neighborhood Council. Serious and violent crimes like rape and homicide were down 14 percent this year in Venice and surrounding areas as of February.

In an area dubbed Silicon Beach that is quickly filling up with high tech startups, one type of crime that has gone up is theft, which police say has risen by 48 percent in recent months. In April, one man in Marina del Rey, just south of Washington Boulevard, was robbed of his Google Glass while sitting on his own ground-floor porch facing the ocean.

Linda Lucks, president of the Venice Neighborhood Council, said while there has been debate about security, much of the board agreed with having more police who regularly patrol the area. But she notices the changes, too.

“The different type of people that have moved here ... they have different standards,” she said. “They’re not as tolerant of seeing homeless people. Some of us like the diversity and the funkiness and the ability to live around people who don’t just look like us.”

She said that while people with money might have more influence to kick out the homeless, there’s also a positive side for Venice Beach.

“We have been the stepchild of the city; it is shameful how we have been neglected,” she said. “We don’t have enough bathrooms, we don’t have enough parking, we don’t get cleaned enough.”

But she thinks now, with affluence might come more attention. As far as whether Bonin’s goal to create a system to manage and improve the area goes, she said, “We’re hopeful.”

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